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Russia's European Game in Syria

PARIS – This much is clear in Syria: There is no good solution.

There has not been a good solution since that black Wednesday in August 2013, when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's war machine, by using chemical weapons, crossed the “red line” that US President Barack Obama had warned would trigger an American military response. The moderate opposition still stood, and the Islamic State had not yet emerged from the shadows. Yet, in a shocking last-minute about-face, Obama declined to intervene.

That lapse cannot be undone. But in the hell of bad solutions on offer for Syria, some are worse than others. And the one devised by Russian President Vladimir Putin is probably the most infernal of all.

Russian airstrikes have been concentrated on targets around the cities of Idlib, Homs, and Hama – areas where, according to independent observers, jihad watchers, and other groups that scrutinize the videos placed online by the Russian authorities themselves, the Islamic State is not established. This means that the primary objective

of the Russian attacks is to weaken the entire opposition, including the democratic opposition, fighting the Assad regime.

The goal of Russia's intervention is therefore not to contribute to the "struggle against terrorism," as the Kremlin's propagandists claim, but to restore political control, at any cost, to the regime that spawned the terrorism in the first place. More precisely, Russia's aim is to rescue (after a long period of arm's-length support) a dictatorship that American and French authorities describe as being responsible for causing more than 250,000 deaths since 2011. The regime's behavior no doubt fueled the terrifying rise of the Islamic State as well, providing Assad with a trump card in his bid for international support – and Russia with a fig leaf.

One might argue that the past is past and that, in view of the general disaster in Syria, Russia's intervention will at least have the benefit of halting the country's free fall. But the first consequence of Putin's offensive – one employing methods tested in the two Chechen wars and not burdened, to put it mildly, by the precautions observed by Western armed forces – will be to increase, not reduce, the number of civilian casualties.

The world was rightly horrified by America's recent blunder in bombing the Médecins Sans Frontières' hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan. But how many Syrian Kunduzes will result from Russian airstrikes if the Kremlin continues to favor unguided bombs over guided missiles? (This is just one example of Russia's tactics, but one that reveals much about how Putin intends to prosecute his latest foreign adventure.)

And can anyone believe, even fleetingly, that Russia's intervention will lessen, rather than aggravate, Syria's refugee crisis? Putin's methods are forcing tens of thousands of civilians to flee indiscriminate airstrikes, clearing the way for the death squads of a regime that in recent months had been showing signs of exhaustion, and dashing any remaining hope of creating effective safe zones in northern Jordan and southern Turkey.

Now even the last holdouts among the regime's opponents will be appearing on the roads of Europe. They will not appear on the roads of Russia, mind you: Unlike Germany or France, Putin will not hesitate, while terrorizing tomorrow's refugees, to slam the door in their faces.

Nor is Putin shy about his intentions in Syria. One piece of news reported by Russian media but curiously unheeded in the West is that the missile cruiser *Moskva*, with its dozens of anti-aircraft ordnance, has been deployed to Latakia.

But the Islamic State has not, unbeknownst to everyone but Putin, acquired an air force that needs to be neutralized. Rather, the Kremlin evidently will view as a legitimate target any aircraft that might pass over territory that it comes to regard as being under its control. And, because any such plane would necessarily be flying the flag of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, or another member of the coalition fighting the Islamic State, it is not hard to envisage how Russia's involvement could lead to international escalation of Syria's civil war.

Fortunately, we are not there yet. But let us not pretend that Russia's military operations, which, to date, have been aimed solely at providing Russia with mastery over Syrian airspace and protecting its interests on the ground, are bolstering efforts to defeat the Islamic State.

Putin is not just a fireman who sets fires; he is an old-school imperialist. His operation in Syria is partly designed to divert attention from his dismemberment of Ukraine. And his thinly veiled threats against the Baltic states, Poland, Finland, and now Turkey – whose airspace and relations with NATO have been probed by Russian aircraft – reveal a strategy of aggression that has as its chief goal the weakening of Europe.

Europeans must wake up to Putin's design before it is too late. In France, the siren song of appeasement is becoming a national rallying cry, from the far-right National Front to far-left elements – and among a growing number of mainstream politicians of all stripes. Indeed, the Kremlin has assiduously cultivated party secretariats across Europe. A web of invisible links has brought into being what could be called "Putin's Party" in Europe.

If Putin's Party were enticing only the usual European populist demagogues, from Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom to Viktor Órban in Hungary, it would be bad enough. But when even leaders who are normally considered to be responsible statesmen, such as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, begin justifying Putin's actions, Europe risks frittering away the very security on which its prosperity is built.

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